DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 269 338 SO 017 153

AUTHOR Lambert, Robert G., Jr.
TITLE Grant's Final Battle: The Writing of His Memoirs.
INSTITUTION Army Public Affairs, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Sep 85
NOTE 21p.; For related documents, see SO 017 151-154.
PUB TYPE Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Autobiographies; Black History; *Blacks; Civil Rights; *Civil War (United States); Humanities; Military Science; Personal Narratives; United States History; United States Literature
IDENTIFIERS *Grant (Ulysses S); *Twain (Mark)

ABSTRACT

In the summer of 1884, Ulysses S. Grant wrote his "Memoirs," which were published and promoted by the great American writer, Mark Twain, who encouraged and aided Grant in his literary work. Grant was fatally ill with cancer of the throat and raced against time to complete his manuscript. He was motivated by the desire to provide financial support for his family, which had been impoverished by his business failures. The book that emerged from Grant's courageous efforts is a masterpiece, which literary experts and historians have compared to Caeser's "Commentaries." "The Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant" treats his childhood slightly, expands to detail his Mexican War experiences, skims over his inter-war activities, and concludes with a major emphasis on his participation in the Civil War. Grant's clear, concise, treatment of Civil War experiences have made his book a classic of military history, which is studied in military academies throughout the world. Mark Twain's relationship to Grant is highlighted in two "Sidebars" that are appended to this essay. "Sidebar Number One" is a brief excerpt from "The Private History of a Campaign That Failed" by Mark Twain, in which Twain describes his fleeting encounter with Grant during the Civil War. "Sidebar Number Two" discusses a pamphlet titled, "How to Introduce the Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant," which is addressed to salesmen of Grant's "Memoirs" and may have been written by Mark Twain. A chronology of main events in Grant's life is also appended. (JP)

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GRANT'S FINAL BATTLE: THE WRITING OF HIS MEMOIRS

by

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SO017153

U.S. Army
NEWS RELEASE
Army Public Affairs
Washington, D.C. 20310

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE 85-063

GRANT'S MEMOIRS

GRANT'S FINAL BATTLE: THE WRITING OF HIS MEMOIRS

by ROBERT G. LAMBERT, Ph.D.

Perhaps the most fortunate adversity in the life of Ulysses S. Grant was his failure to be nominated for a third Presidential term in 1880. This non-event provided Grant with the time, if only a year, and the motives, debt and bankruptcy, to impel him to write his autobiograpic Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant. His not disinterested publisher, the American humorist Mark Twain (who before heading West had served desultorily as a Confederate volunteer in a ragtag unit that dissolved itself after a few weeks of rain and frustration), compared Grant's Memoirs to Caesar's Commentaries -- a critical opinion that has generally been upheld.

Although generally impressed by the Memoirs, the British critic Matthew Arnold carped at Grant's misuses of grammar and termed his style "an English without charm and without high breeding." Outraged, Twain fired back this trans-Atlantic volley: "This is the simple soldier, who, all untaught of the silken phrase-makers, linked words together with an art surpassing the art of the schools and put into them a something which will still bring to American ears, as long as America shall last, the roll of his vanished drums

and the tread of his marching hosts."

How Grant's Memoirs came to be published by one of America's greatest prose writers is a story worth retelling, for their publication not only provided a priceless historic record but also insured that Grant would not die as an abject bankrupt, unable even to provide an estate for his family. Grant's Memoirs also enriched Mark Twain, at least temporarily. (Like many of his characters, Mark Twain, too, was trying to strike it rich. He eventually squandered his wealth on a sophisticated, but technologically impractical, typesetting machine.)

Grant's trail to literary distinction began when he was denied the Republican nomination in 1880, after returning from a highly publicized around-the-world tour, a kind of international campaign. Settling for the life of a Wall Street speculator as part of the firm of Grant (his son) and Ward, the senior Grant used his reputation to inspire investor confidence. However, although Grant was innocent of wrongdoing, his name was besmirched when Ward fled after bankrupting the firm with dishonest business dealings. Not only was Grant impoverished, but he was $150,000 in debt to William Vanderbilt and also felt responsible for the financial ruin of those investors who had trusted him. Already partly crippled by a fall in 1883, Grant was seen by an observer on that day of disgrace seated totally alone in his office, his head bowed in humiliation, his hands convulsively clutching the arms of his chair.

Despite an outpouring of national sympathy and small monetary

gifts, as well as an eventual, if delayed, Congressional reinstatement that would allow Grant a modest Army pension, such trickles of support could do little to alleviate his indebtedness or assure his family of an estate after his death.

Although Grant had decided earlier not to write about his experiences, the pressure of poverty compelled him during the summer of 1884 to write several articles for Century Magazine, being paid what was even then a paltry $500. Discussions had even begun concerning a book based on these articles when Mark Twain stepped in.

Honorable as always, Grant felt that these discussions with Century morally obligated him to choose that press. But in a conversation with Grant during the Fall of 1884, Twain reminded the former President of an earlier request Twain had made to publish his memoirs. Beyond this, Twain also had experience selling subscription books, Huck Finn being one, and Twain promised Grant a 70% share of net profits, a far better royalty than the inexperienced Century representatives had offered. In March of 1885, after the book was largely written, Grant accepted this contract as it would eventually enrich his family by almost half a million dollars.

During the fall of 1884, using the Century articles as a nucleus, Grant began writing in earnest, largely through dictation. That bleak autumn, Grant knew the completion of the book would be a difficult task, literally a race with death.

-MORE-

For in the summer of 1884, Grant had experienced severe pain while swallowing a peach. It was the first signal of a throat cancer that would kill him in July of the following year. But that fall of 1884, the cancer, which would have been cured had it been surgically removed earlier that summer, was inoperable, probably the result of his lifelong cigar habit.

In February 1885, Twain visited Grant. Twain cheerfully mentioned a newspaper article saying the symptoms of Grant's cancer had disappeared. Grant replied huskily, "Yes, if the report were only true."

Despite the pain (swallowing water felt like ingesting molten lead) Grant worked with an industry that awed Twain. "He had dictated 10,000 words at a single sitting. It kills me these days to write the half of it."

Near death in March 1885, Grant was too weak to protest a "deathbed baptism," but after the ceremony, he surprisingly rallied. Less impressed with the religiosity at work, his physician, George F. Shrady (father to the sculptor of the Grant Memorial to the South of the Capitol Building) noted, "I was inclined to attribute the result to brandy."

To spare Grant the heat of a summer in New York City while he was finishing his Memoirs, the family moved to a donated cottage on Mount McGregor near Saratoga Springs, New York. There Grant bade farewell to long lines of well-wishers and former enemies, including

General Buckner, to whom Grant had sent these terse lines insuring the surrender of Ft. Donelson, "Unconditional and immediate surrender...I propose to move immediately upon your works."

To one portly visitor in the cottage, Grant wrote (he could barely speak), "Dr. Gray, your shadow has grown no less since I saw you in Utica, mine has reduced materially."

Grant's increasing agonies were treated by skillful blendings of cocaine, hypodermic alcohol, and morphine. When his voice gave out, Grant communicated, often with mordant wit, to his doctors on yellow slips of paper which have been preserved at the Library of Congress. They show Grant's mind unimpaired by the disease and verify that Grant's intellect among Presidents (though he was <u>not</u> an intellectual) was probably surpassed only by Jefferson, Lincoln, and, possibly, Wilson.

Grant wrote to his physician on the hopelessness of his condition: "If you are unwilling to have me go without consultation with other professional men, you can send for them."

A later note, undated but near the end, would not shame the epigrammatic American poet Emily Dickinson, as it shows the desperate clarity of his mind: "I think I am a verb instead of a personal pronoun. A verb is anything that signifies to be; to do; to suffer. I signify all three."

And one of Grant's last notes sums up the curious bewilderment he felt as he surveyed his own surprising life:

-MORE-

GRANT'S MEMOIRS

> "If I live long enough I will become a sort of specialist in the use of certain medicines, if not in the treatment of disease. It seems that man's destiny in the world is quite as much a mystery as it is likely to be in the next. I never thought of acquiring rank in the profession I was educated for; yet it came with two grades higher prefixed to the rank of General officer for me. I certainly never had either ambition or taste for political life; yet I was twice President of the United States. If anyone had suggested the idea of my becoming an author, as they frequently did, I was not sure whether they were making sport of me or not. I have now written a book which is in the hands of the manufacturers. I ask that you keep these notes very private lest I become an authority on the treatment of diseases. I have already too many trades to be proficient in any. Of course I feel very much better for your application of cocaine, the first in three days, or I should never have thought of saying what I have said above."

That book of Grant's which emerged from "the manufacturers" consists of Grant's almost total recall purged by suffering. It treats slightly of his childhood, expands to embrace his adventures in the Mexican War, skims over his inter-war failures (he was happiest farming) and concludes with his experiences in the Civil War. This part has two climaxes, the fall of Vicksburg and the surrender at Appomattox. A curious, almost stream-of-consciousness "Conclusion" ends the work.

The tone of the work is flat, laconic, unemotional -- the view of a commander, not a trench soldier. There is little vivid description of the smoke and fury of battle. Yet its clarity, simplicity, and almost total recall have made it a classic of military history, studied in military academies throughout the world.

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GRANT'S MEMOIRS

During his final struggles with cancer, Grant's Memoirs became his life. When it was finished, so was his own hard-fought, uneven, adventurous, improbable, and -- ultimately -- triumphant existence.

Virtually his last words were spoken to comfort his gathered family: "I hope no one will be distressed at my condition."

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GRANT'S MEMOIRS

SIDEBAR NUMBER ONE:

LT. SAM CLEMENS MEETS COL. U. S. GRANT (ALMOST)

From: The Private History of a Campaign That Failed

by Mark Twain

In that summer -- of 1861-- the first wash of the wave of war broke upon the shores of Missouri. Our State was invaded by the Union forces. They took possession of St. Louis, Jefferson Barracks, and some other points. The Governor, Calib Jackson, issued his proclamation calling out fifty thousand militia to repel the invader.

I was visiting in the small town where my boyhood had been spent -- Hannibal, Marion County. Several of us got together in a secret place by night and formed ourselves into a military company. One Tom Lyman, a young fellow of a good deal of spirit but of no military experience, was made captain; I was made second lieutenant. We had no first lieutenant; I do not know why; it was long ago.

(After a few weeks of frustration and rainy campouts -- as well as the alleged ambushing of an un-uniformed stranger which may never have happened Mark Twain decides to quit.)

...We met General Harris on the road with two or three people in his company -- his staff, probably, but we could not tell; none

-MORE

of them were in uniform; uniforms had not come into vogue among us yet. Harris ordered us back but we told him there was a Union colonel coming with a whole regiment in his wake and it looked as if there was going to be a disturbance; so we had concluded to go home. He raged a little but it was of no use; our minds were made up. We had done our share; had killed one man, exterminated one army, such as it was; let him go and kill the rest, and that would end the war. I did not see that brisk young general again until last year; then he was wearing white hair and whiskers.

In time I came to know that Union colonel whose coming frightened me out of the war and crippled the Southern cause to that extent -- General Grant. I came within a few hours of seeing him when he was as unknown as I was myself; at a time when anyone could have said, "Grant? -- Ulysses S. Grant? I do not remember hearing the name before." It seems difficult to realize that there was once a time when such a remark could be rationally made but there <u>was</u>, and I was within a few miles of the place and the occasion too, though proceeding in the other direction.

...There was more Bull Run material scattered through the early camps of this country than exhibited itself at Bull Run Scene of an early and unexpected Southern victory . And yet it learned its trade presently and helped to fight the great battles later. I could have become a soldier myself, if I had waited. I had got part of it learned. I knew more about retreating than the man that

invented retreating.

Biographers feel Twain exaggerated the proximity of Grant to himself for dramatic effect.

SIDEBAR NUMBER TWO

HOW NOT TO SELL U.S. GRANT'S MEMOIRS

by MARK TWAIN (?)

Nested in a brown folder amid the stacks of the Library of Congress lies a flaking, 38 page pamphlet titled, How To Introduce the Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant. It is addressed to the salesmen who, as encyclopedia sellers do today, fanned out through the countryside as subscription agents to take orders for the book. (Grant's Memoirs were not sold in bookstores and a copy was printed only on receipt of an order. Sales of the two-volume work were so great that the Grant family earned almost half a million dollars in royalties.)

The alleged author of the sales pamphlet is R. S. Peale & Company, possibly a Twainian pun for Our Spiel. An anagram of the alleged author also spells out Lee's Rap. (Twain loved word games and a copy of a rebus (pictures for words) written to his wife is displayed at the National Geographic Twain exhibit in Washington, D.C.)

Whether or not Twain wrote the entire sales pamphlet, much of

which consists of sensible, if stodgy, advice of the type given to encyclopedia salesmen today ("We believe the success of the agent depends very largely upon his ability to deliver a smooth and effective description of the contents of his prospectus."), biographer Justin Kaplan believes Twain oversaw and almost certainly wrote parts of it. The closing admonition to would-be canvassers certainly sounds like Twain and might well be included in future selections of his apocryphal writings:

HOW TO MAKE THE BUSINESS A FAILURE

1. Instead of canvassing your township thoroughly, run around in search of better territory; or

2. Skip over it here and there, without any regard to system or of the importance of working by school districts, and of keeping up an influence as you go.

3. Instead of having the description at your tongue's end, so as to interest and please the people, only half learn it.

4. As the backwoods exhorter concluded that he could preach best without "larnin," so you should conclude that you can sell your book just as well whether you know much about it or not.

5. All our great public lecturers and orators carefully write out their speeches and commit every word of them to memory, so as not to tire their audiences by confused ideas. But you should consider it boyish to do anything of this kind; just run over the description a few times, and then go out and bore the people, and wonder why you don't succeed.

-MORE-

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6. If you find people sour and disagreeable, be surly and mean in return; that is a good way to win people's confidence and make them interested in you.

7. Work about half the time, and then only on pleasant days. People would be surprised to see you at work in stormy, cold or wet weather. They might think you meant business. Do not startle the good people in that manner.

If you faithfully follow out these instructions and do not succeed in making a fizzle of your business and a general nuisance of yourself, then we will agree to secure you a first-class salary as an unparalleled curiosity in Barnum's big show.

-END-

Dr. Robert G. Lambert is a professor of journalism and American literature. His last academic post was at Virginia State University in Petersburg, Va.

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Autographed photo of Samuel L. Clemens (Mark Twain) publisher of Grant's Memoirs. The Memoirs earned almost $500,000 for the Grant family.

Brady Archives 1085 in National Archives.

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LAST PHOTOGRAPH OF GEN. GRANT, FOUR DAYS BEFORE DEATH.

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Sitter: Ulysses S. Grant Acc. no: S/77.33

Artist: Gilman Date: 1885

Medium: photo Dims: 10.2 X 15 cm. image

Negative number: 077431

Credit: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.

General Grant on cottage porch at Mt. McGregor four days before his death from throat cancer. National Portrait Gallery, in conjunction with exhibit: "U. S. Grant: The Man and the Image." (Please use by November 11, 1985.)

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CHRONOLOGY OF GENERAL U. S. GRANT
APRIL 27, 1822 -- JULY 23, 1885

Based on a Chronology compiled by
General Sir James Marshall-Cornwall from
Grant as a Military Commander, Van Nostrand, 1970.

April 27, 1822	Hiram Ulysses Grant born in Ohio
June 14, 1839	Mix-up in name registers Ulysses Simpson Grant as West Point cadet
July, 1843	From West Point, Grant commissioned in 4th Infantry
March, 1846	Mexican War begins
September 13, 1847	Grant promoted on battlefield to Brevet Captain
February 2, 1848	Mexican War ends
August 22, 1848	Grant marries Julia Dent
March, 1852	Grant's regiment ordered to California
July 31, 1854	Grant resigns Army commission
October 16, 1859	John Brown's raid
November 6, 1860	Lincoln elected
April 12, 1861	Civil War starts
April 23, 1861	Grant rejoins Army at Springfield, Ill.
June 17, 1861	Grant promoted to Colonel
August 7, 1861	Grant promoted to Brigadier-General
February 6, 1862	Grant captures Ft. Henry (Tenn.)
February 16, 1862	Grant captures Ft. Donelson and is promoted to Major-General of Volunteers
April 6-7, 1862	Grant and Buell defeat Johnston and Beauregard at Shiloh

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GRANT CHRONOLOGY

July 11, 1862	Grant appointed by Lincoln to command Armies of Tennessee and Mississippi
October 3-4, 1862	Grant defeats Van Dorn at Corinth, Miss.
October 16, 1862	Grant takes command of the Department of Tennessee
January 1, 1863	Emancipation Proclamation
July 1-4, 1863	Battle of Gettysburg
July 4, 1863	Vicksburg falls to Grant; Grant promoted to Major-General
November 24-25, 1863	Battle of Chattanooga; Grant defeats Bragg
March 3, 1864	Lincoln brings Grant to Washington to command Union Army
March 9, 1864	Grant promoted to Lieutenant General
May 4-6, 1864	Wilderness Battle between Grant and Lee in Virginia
May 9-19, 1864	Battle of Spotsylvania, Va.
June 1-3, 1864	Lee repulses Grant at Cold Harbor
July 30, 1864	Petersburg mine crater attack fails
November 8, 1864	Lincoln re-elected
February 9, 1865	Lee appointed Commander of all Confederate forces
April 2, 1865	Lee abandons Petersburg and Richmond
April 9, 1865	Lee surrenders at Appomattox
April 14, 1865	Lincoln assassinated
November 4, 1868	Grant elected President
November 4, 1872	Grant re-elected President
July 25, 1885	Grant dies after completing Memoirs

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